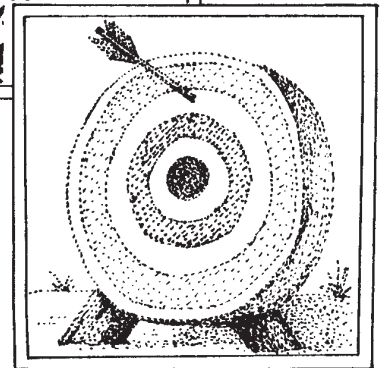
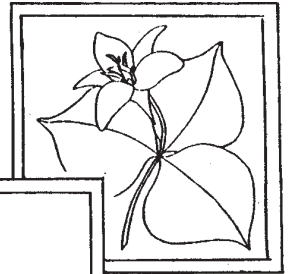
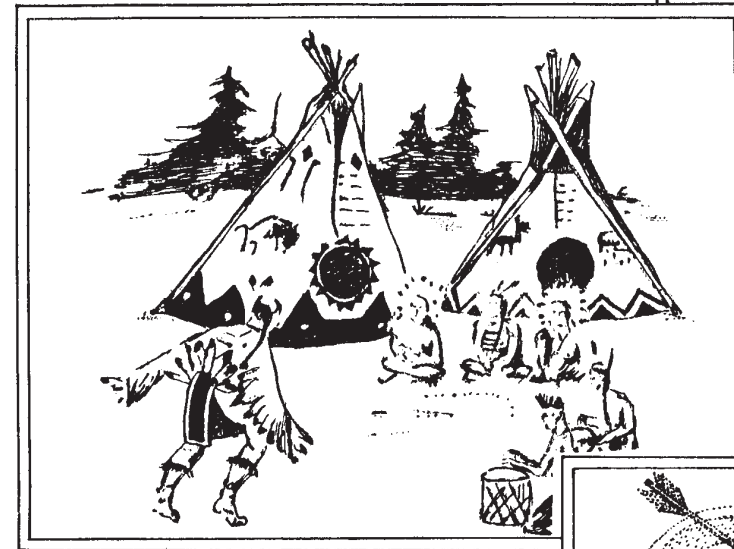


HISTORY OF CALIFORNIA WOODS

1937 - 1987



50 YEARS

CINCINNATI RECREATION COMMISSION

Introduction

In April 1986 I was asked by Lew Spurlock, Director of California Nature Preserve, to prepare some written material pertaining to this interesting area. He has been unable to locate any historical account of it. I worked there as a naturalist and Daycamp Director from late 1947 until September 1954.

My special thanks to Mrs. Sue Lawson, widow of the late Bert Lawson for information relating to the earliest years. Mr. Lawson was the first naturalist and is responsible for much of the success the nature recreation program has enjoyed for many years. This unique outdoor laboratory opened in 1937. This year it will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary.

Both Ruth Heinzerling and Eleanor Morrison, former directors and colleagues reviewed this article and made helpful suggestions.

I hereby dedicate this report to the memory of Mr. Bert Lawson, my boss for seven years and my friend until his untimely death in November 1970, shortly after his retirement.

Paul X. Hellman
June 1986

The nearly 110 acres on which the California Nature Preserve is located is part of the large parcel of land owned for years by the Cincinnati Water Works. On nearby hills are two huge settling basins where water from the Ohio River is collected before it enters the filtration plant on Kellogg Avenue just east of the Nature Preserve. Apple Hill Road, Moon Valley Lane and Kellogg Avenue complete the boundaries.

When Mr. Tom Deering was the superintendent of the Cincinnati Recreation Commission in the 1930's he envisioned a program in nature recreation and made arrangements to establish this at the location which was known as Water Works Park.

In early 1937 the Ohio River flooded at its highest level in history, causing great destruction in the area that had just been designated as the California Nature Preserve. Bert Lawson was hired as the first naturalist and was placed in charge of the area. He had learned about the outdoors from his father who had grown up in the hills of Kentucky. His scientific skill and knowledge, which was considerable, was mostly self taught.

With the help of men from W.P.A. Bert began to clean up the flood residue. When this was finished they began to lay a system of nature trails which required grading, stone steps or log steps, foot bridges and hand rails. Cinders were even hauled to some of the trails as paving.

The first building in the preserve was an old-fashioned voting booth. This was a wooden shack about 9 feet by 14 feet mounted on wheels. It was towed by a truck to a voting precinct for elections. When this practice was discontinued the old booths were towed to parks and playgrounds for temporary shelters. (I remember one of these at the Westwood Commons when I was a boy.) This building served as a Trailside museum for the daycamp. A picture of it appears on page 269 in the book Nature Recreation by William Gould Vinal. On page 270 is a photo by Tam Deering showing the interior of a salvaged election booth converted into a trailside museum.

Mr. Deering was determined to organize an appealing and positive program at the California Nature Preserve. He arranged for Bert Lawson to attend workshop sessions with Dr. William Gould Vinal, a teacher of nature recreation who was on the itinerant faculty of the National

Recreation Association to give instruction in nature recreation in various institutions throughout the country. Mrs. Lawson told me that Bert went to the University of Indiana for this program. This same Captain Bill Vinal conducted a workshop at Ogelbay Park in West Virginia in May 1950 which Bert attended.

Another person who helped design the early programs was Bernard S. Mason, an authority on Indian lore, games, woodcraft, and camping. He authored numerous books on these subjects which provided many helpful hints for conducting interesting activities. Although Mr. Mason had no official connection with the Recreation Commission he and Bert knew each other and shared ideas. One of his students was Jim Stone who became the first Indian dancer at California.

In 1938 the swimming pool and bath house were constructed. Children from Cincinnati Recreation Playgrounds were the first participants.

The open-sided rustic shelter house of timber, stone and wood shingles was built by W.P.A. craftsmen in 1939. The roof was in need of repair in 1949. The Hamilton County Welfare Department under Superintendent Fred Breyer provided relief workers for public properties. Bert Lawson was very fortunate in securing the help of two old Southern Negroes who enjoyed outdoor work.

Frank Roberts was our maintenance man. He would drive his pickup truck to town for these men. They would work with him on different jobs such as clearing trails, removing dead branches or hazardous trees, and cutting weeds. One day they told Bert that they could patch the roof of the shelter house if he located a froe for them. This was an old-fashioned tool used for splitting blocks of wood into shingles. Somewhere he obtained this pioneer implement and these men split an old white oak log into shingles and repaired the decayed roof.

I have another memory of these fine old men. They knew I was interested in birds and asked if I had ever seen a "lord-God" in the woods at California. After considerable inquiry and mutual study of my bird book we identified their birds as a Pileated Woodpecker. None was seen at California during my tenure but it has been recorded there in recent years.

A wood clapboard building which served as a nature den was constructed by Recreation Commission carpenters in 1940. This was built on high ground to avoid flood water.

When World War II began in December 1941 the program at the California Nature Preserve became a war casualty. Because of its proximity to the operations and activities cancelled for fear of possible sabotage.

The staff and operations were transferred to Lunken Airport Playfield and Playhouses. Among other activities was the growing and cultivation of vegetables in Victory Gardens. Reeves Golf Course now occupies this area.

After the war the California Nature preserve reopened for spring, summer, and fall activities in 1946. The winter program continued to function at the Airport Nature Center until March 17, 1950. After that the playhouse building was demolished for highway improvements near Beechmont Avenue.

In 1952 a second floor was added to the bath house. It provided an apartment for a caretaker and space for a nature center. Displays in the museum came from the Airport Nature Center but did not fill it. The staff began collecting and assembling useful items. I caught and mounted many insect specimens. Some specimens were donated by friends, especially school teachers like Elizabeth Brockschlager and Alice Foley. On January 3, 1953 Mr. Ralph Drury, Director of the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History, inspected our efforts and provided welcome advice. He also donated some useful articles from the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History.

In 1960 I assisted in the liquidation of a museum at St. Francis seminary in Mt. Healthy and was able to secure a few specimens for Bert Lawson such as a golden eagle, a black bear, and several mounted ducks.

People wonder how the big church bell arrived at California. On Saturdays I worked as a gardener for Dr. Charles Sebastian who owned a home on Harrison Avenue in Westwood. This house had been built by Mr. Meinken, a noted Cincinnati contractor. One of his significant achievements was the construction of Western Hills High

School. In a barn on this property was this old church bell. Presumably Mr. Meinken had razed a church somewhere in town and stored the bell in his barn. I asked Bert if he thought we could substitute the ringing of a bell in lieu of blowing athletic whistles to round up our children. He said we could give it a try. Dr. Sebastian was glad to give the bell to us. Frank Roberts and I loaded it on his pickup truck and brought it to California in 1949. Lick Run Creek empties into the nearby Little Miami River. Early in the century the Water Works constructed four heavy concrete check dams along this creek. Bert told me that he considered these dams hazardous and unsightly. He and co-workers spent many hours with sledge hammers and steel bull points knocking down these dams. Their remains are still evident.

Flood water on the Ohio River will cause the Miami to rise and this forces high water into the creek and over the road. In April (1947) during a flood Bert saw the opportunity for an adventure. He borrowed a canoe from the Lunken Airport Playfield and the two of us paddled between the trees across Kellogg Avenue and into the Miami River. When we began to feel the current near the confluence of the Ohio, we turned the canoe and paddled back. This interesting experience was very suggestive of pioneer days.

The topography of the area consists of several steep hills cut by gullies. Lick Run Creek runs through the approximate middle. Elevation lies between 479 to 589 feet above sea level.

The forest crown is somewhat open with younger trees at various heights and a scattered understory of smaller species and shrubs. Mature trees are 120 feet high and 4 feet in diameter. The dominant large trees are tulip, beech, sycamore, sugar maple, white ash, linden, hackberry, and red oak. Other species include cottonwood, black walnut, hickory, black cherry, honey locust, yellow buckeye, black gum and sassafras. A magnificent ancient burr oak stands on the hill above the open rustic shelter. Pawpaw, dogwood, and spicebush are smaller and make up the understory of the forest. Wild grape, Virginia creeper, poison ivy and honey-suckle vines provide food for wildlife.

On the hills and in the valleys there is a profusion of wild flowers. Early spring is the best time to see spring beauty, trout lily, celandine poppy,

Dutchman's Breeches, squirrel corn, Jack-in-the-pulpit, wild ginger, and the sensational white trillium. On April 25, 1982, the National Park Service dedicated Trillium Valley at California as a National Recreation Trail.

In his early years at California Bert Lawson made an effort to identify all the herbaceous plants. With a copy of Gray's Manual of Botany he diligently checked and catalogued nearly all the extant species. Later he began to photograph them and amassed an amazing slide collection of wild flowers. In 1950 Bert obtained a motion picture camera and began making a film on nature activities. He was very protective of a little patch of tway-blade orchids, a few ginseng plants, some shooting stars, and *Synandra hispidula*. This last is an endangered plant of Ohio. The California Nature Preserve is one of its very few local habitats.

Local nature enthusiasts are well aware of the exciting beauty of the woods at California. The Wildflower Preservation Society has had walks there. The Audubon Society of Ohio sponsors bird hikes. Karl Maslowski has shot film footage for some of his nature movies. Karl frequently published interesting nature news about California in his weekly column "Naturalist Afield" in the Cincinnati Enquirer. I have copies of fourteen different articles between 1950 and 1957. An aquatic biologist, Dr. Jackson, from the U.S. Public Health Service, was studying water pollution. He would catch samples of creatures to compare with other local streams. He considered Lick Run Creek one of the cleanest streams in Hamilton County in the 1950's. On June 12, 1950 the Cincinnati Enquirer printed a photograph by Allan Kain of a rare Worm-eating Warbler feeding two baby birds at their nests. The picture was taken after I showed Allan the nest. Woodrow Goodpaster, a naturalist with the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History, made time-lapse shots of blooming wildflowers. Woody was a good friend of Bert Lawson and in 1947 he gave Bert a live Gila Monster that he had caught in Arizona. This was one of many interesting pets we had on display periodically for the education and enjoyment of our young visitors. In recent years John Ferner of Thomas More College has made a study of the reptiles and amphibians at California.

In the summer of 1949 a graduate student in outdoor education from Cornell University came out to interview Bert and study our nature

program. Later that year Mel Rebholz, who was then associated with the Hamilton County Parks, visited us to observe our activities. Teachers from the University of Cincinnati and the University of Kentucky brought botany students to study plant life and ecology. During 1951 science teachers from the Cincinnati Public Schools came to California for a workshop in nature study.

My personal forte in natural history is ornithology. I was fascinated by the numbers and variety of birds I found when I began to work at California. During my first two years I counted more than one hundred species of birds there. In addition to the residents many migrants came through in spring and fall. In 1950 I started to make a breeding bird census. I did this again in 1951, 1952, and 1956. Forty species were identified as nesting birds. I also conducted winter bird population studies. A total of twenty-seven species were recorded in winter. These reports were published in titled "Audubon Field Notes."

Several competent ornithologists like Worth Randle and Earl Thirey have added to the total list of birds recorded in California. In 1980 Earl showed me a Great Horned Owl's nest. During my seven years on the staff I have never seen one there.

Because of its popularity as a good birding spot among local bird watchers the California Nature Preserve is recognized nationally in two books. It is listed on page 438 in *A Guide to Bird Finding East of the Mississippi* by Olin Sewall Pettingill, Jr. It is also recommended on Page 303 in *A Bird Watcher's Guide to the Eastern United States* by Alice M. Geffen.

One of my favorite recollections concerns an elderly gentleman who came to see me late in the afternoon one day in May. He told me his daughter was a teacher who had recently brought her school class to California. She was impressed by the birds. All his life this man had wanted to see a Scarlet Tanager and a Rose-Breasted Grosbeak and I was to show them to him then and there. I told him that was a big order but I would try. We took a short walk and we did find both birds. He was ecstatic. He said he felt like the little Hiawatha following old Nokomis.

Programs and activities have varied over the fifty years of its existence

but the emphasis has always been on nature. Staff members have consistently endeavored to inculcate an understanding and appreciation of things found in these woods.

Bert was always very keen about our Indian program. He was very well versed in Indian lore. He was also a master craftsman and created authentic apparel and accouterments for use in our Indian dancing and ceremonies. He sewed, decorated and assembled a big canvas tepee. He made feathered headgear and war bonnets, leather moccasins, leggings, bone breast plates, beaded decorations, rattles, and drums. One of his prize productions was a huge council drum that he made by stretching rawhide across the top and bottom of a wooden wash tub after the original bottom was removed. He carved a peace pipe out of the soft stone called catlinite that Indians formerly used.

I recall an amusing incident after a family vacation. I told Bert that we saw a freshly killed porcupine on a highway in Northern Wisconsin. He told me I should have brought it back because the Chippewa Indians used quills of porcupines for their costumes and he could have done likewise.

During my years Mr. Herb A. Davis was Superintendent of the Cincinnati Recreation Commission. He wanted as many young people as possible to experience a day in the woods. He instructed us to carry capacity crowds. We usually employed three full time staff members. In the early spring and in the fall we scheduled two or three school classes every day. They would arrive by chartered bus. Our naturalists led them on a hike. Then they enjoyed some archery practice with bows and arrows. After their sack lunch we conducted an Indian ceremony with fire building, dances, stories, games, singing, and demonstrations. Bert was always pleased with letters the pupils wrote after their visits.

During the summer we conducted a similar program for children from different Cincinnati Recreation Playgrounds. Other youth organizations were also welcomed. Among our participants were Girl Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, Boy Scouts, Y.M.C.A., Y.W.C.A., Boys Clubs, orphanages and church groups. The swimming pool and softball field added to the summer we counted 3,000 youngsters in our daycamp program. In the fall of 1949 we conducted programs for 1,042 school children.

With no facilities for a winter program our nature and camping personnel were assigned to neighborhood community centers to conduct clubs and handicraft classes after school and in the evenings. We went to Winton Terrace, Union Bethel, Hartwell, Washington Park, Grant, Carthage, Price Hill, and California. Our headquarters was located in Brighton at the old 27th District School on Winchel Avenue. Tools and supplies for the recreation maintenance Department were stored in this building. We had a big classroom on the third floor. The Harrison Avenue Interchange to I-75 now obliterates this entire area.

Henry Stock and I ran the spring program at California in 1951, starting on April 23. We concluded this work with school children on June 15, having served nearly 2500 youngsters. During that summer Catherine Jo Gay also worked with Henry and me. In the fall Catherine stayed at California and Henry went to Walnut Hills where Bert had organized a new nature area.

On November 9, 1951, I started a recreation program for children at the old California School. They were being transported to Mt. Washington School. Catherine Jo Gay and Henry Stock helped out once or twice a week with craft projects and games. In January (1952) a flood on the Ohio River converted our recreation center into a relief building as local residents brought in their furniture and household possessions to keep them out of high water.

On March 31, 1952, the Lawson family comprised of Bert, Sue, and son Kirk moved into the caretaker's apartment at California. On April 1, we went to Winchel Avenue to pack supplies and house them to California. Catherine Jo Gay resigned on April 3. Ruth Heinzerling replaced her. In the evening of July 9, 1952, Bert and I organized a swimming party and wiener roast for California teenagers which was a big success. We also arranged overnight camping for Boy Scouts. Ruth Heinzerling took charge of the Walnut Hills nature program in the fall of 1952 and Eleanor Morrison joined us at California.

During the winter of 1952 and 1953, we operated our first indoor programs at the new California Nature Center. Henry Stock resigned on May 1. Don Brannen was hired in his place. On July 16, Fraser Douglass, a Cincinnati teacher and authority on Indians, came to

California at Bert's invitation to help Don with his Indian program. On July 22, Bert and I conducted an evening program for local teens. Chilly weather cancelled the swimming but we substituted some games and a camp fire. Eleanor Morrison brought some new ideas to our fall program with leaf printing with crayons, mushroom prints, animal tracks, leaf printing on ammonia sensitive paper, and flash cards.

Walnut Hills was closed to make way for I-71 and Ruth opened a new nature program at LaBoiteaux Woods in 1954. Eleanor, Ken, and I worked together through the summer of 1954. All three of us then left to pursue other opportunities. Don passed away in 1962 at an early age.

This history would not be complete without some record and recognition of later staff members who worked long and successfully to maintain high quality programs. Sue Lawson worked for seventeen years, Emily Miller for fourteen, and Fred Nieman for fifteen years. My apologies to other good people with whom I am not acquainted.

Working at California Nature Preserve was not all fun and games. Some persons considered the ford on the creek to be their private car wash. Persuading them otherwise was sometimes difficult. Occasionally in spring when the garden bug bit, certain individuals figured the easiest place to obtain some fertile top soil was in the woods of California. Other folks thought they could improve their wildflower garden by digging plants at the preserve. To alleviate some of these problems Bert was deputized with police authority and so was I. Our badge usually resolved the difficulty.

One of our biggest problems was the open gate on weekends. People regarded it as another park open to the public. No provisions for control were available. Established trails were often ignored and new ones improvised at random, tramping down fragile plants. Grapevines were cut and converted into Tarzan swings. Litter accumulated all over the place. When the staff arrived on Monday morning all hands were put to work collecting the trash to improve appearance before our scheduled groups arrived. When a small boy drowned in the creek one Sunday it forced the authorities to study the situation. Eventually the gate was kept locked on Saturdays and Sundays except by special arrangement.

In January (1954) the City Council was confronted with one of its frequent financial crises. The Recreation Department was threatened with drastic cuts in its budget. The nature program looked like a sure loser. Somehow it weathered the storm so California and LaBoiteaux Woods continued to operate.

The ups and downs of city finances have created a multitude of budget problems for the Nature and Camping Division of the Recreation Department. In view of the increasing awareness of the value of outdoor recreation and education this is very unfortunate. In 1984 the Outdoor Education program lost valuable staff members because of these vicissitudes of financing.

A natural area such as the California Nature preserve within corporate limits of the City of Cincinnati is priceless. Every effort must be made to preserve it and use it wisely.

CALIFORNIA NATURE PRESERVE--SOME MEMORIES--FRED NIEMAN

My first acquaintance with California Nature Preserve was as a 7th and 8th grader from Hartwell School coming with Mrs. Knapp, Mrs. Cromwell and Miss Flett. These trips would have been in the Springs of 1941 and 1942. I distinctly remember Bert Lawson in high lace up boots leading us on fossil hunts. I have flash memories of putting our pop bottles in a long open cooler; voting booth museum just beyond where museum now is; the big hollow sycamore nearby and the real old one farther down the creek; horseshoe in tree near museum; playing games where Indian Council ring was later located; the other leader whose names I think was Wally. If I recall correctly, Wally was killed at Pearl harbor.

I think that Bert told me that work started on the nature preserve prior to the 1937 flood possibly 1936. Some gravel trails had been laid out in the valley and that these had been covered and ruined by the flood. I may be wrong, but I thought that Bert told me that Frank Elliot was the first naturalist. Bert in those early years was heavily involved in maintenance after the groups left he and Wally would work on those dams with the sledge hammers and drill points. Bert said he kept a pistol on his person with some of the work crews he was sent notably Hartwell and Riverside.

Bert was an excellent craft instructor. Jim Stone was the Indian protege of Dr. Mason and I think attended U.C. At some time in those early years Don Shanks and Chet Doyle from Hartwell camped and put on Indian programs. Other Indian performers I knew or heard of included Henry Stock, Fraser Douglass, Don Brannon, Dee Felice, Joe Dick and myself. I worked there over 15 years, 1955-1970.

During my early years (late fifties) we went to various community center weekly during the winter months. We had craft and Indian Clubs. I forget when the addition was built onto the museum but after that we established winter pioneer programs as part of a year-round program. We in essence had then four separate and seasonal programs.

Outdoor programs included nature walk, archery, and an Indian program. The fourth activity varied with the seasons: nature craft in autumn; camping demonstration in spring; swimming in summer. We routinely had afterschool groups. I would say about 50% of the days during the outdoor year.

I worked at California Woods, as it was sometimes called, from 1955 to 1970. My main co-workers were Emily Miller and Sue Lawson. We were a good team and worked hard. None of us were ever at a loss for words. Bert and Sue travelled and put together fine nature and history programs which Sue presented. Emily was and is a fine "birder." Both Sue and Emily were nature and Indian lore enthusiasts. Together with Bert we turned out a quantity of Indian equipment and costuming. We did the same in connection with the pioneer program. Making museum displays was another enjoyable job.

All in all it was a fine job and a wonderful place to work. In spite of all the variables that enter into public work, in spite of parks and recreation always being low on the economic totem pole, this ecological jewel has maintained an integrity originated by one person, Bert Lawson. California Nature Preserve. May the Preserve always be protected and respected and the people who worked so hard to make it is what it is today remembered.

Epilogue- Written By Lew Spurlock, OEC Director, 1986

Overview- The year of 1970 was to bring about a great change in Outdoor Education, Cincinnati--Bert Lawson retired and the new facility Avon Woods Outdoor Education Center was added to the list of California Woods and LaBoiteaux Woods. The great social change sweeping the Nation brought attention to the ecological and environmental needs of our Nation. Never has Outdoor Education enjoyed such great focus to be placed upon it.

The much emphasized Indian program gave way to the food chain, web of life and ecology tree. Earth Week was celebrated and Earth Day was its highlight. High risk recreation became a focus--canoeing, rappelling, extended trips and Green Thumb Gardens were big advances in our program. Other activities had their rise and fall, but the very popular and much requested interpretive walks, live animals and educational talks always remain the highlight of a field trip for students and special groups.

Naturemobile Program became popular and a mobile unit was purchased and used at all the Nature Centers. This meant that nature programs of all kinds could be taken into the classroom, Senior Centers, Nursing Homes, Playgrounds, Community Centers and many other facilities.

Interns were interested in our Outdoor Education Program, completed their practicum and stayed with us after graduation or moved on to naturalist jobs at other Outdoor Education Centers throughout the country.

New Special Events were very popular, such as Pioneer Day, Halloween Haunted Trail, Wildflower Celebrations, Eco-wide, Easter Egg hunts and Autumn in the East. There were great celebrations and completely staffed on those days with a full-time and very talented staff. The year of 1976, our nation's Bicentennial year, was celebrated at all centers. California Woods had its own "Trail 1776." LaBoiteaux Woods was a pioneer in "Living History" with such characters as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Betsy Ross and other Bicentennial Eco-wide program.

Many fine programs have been and still are being offered at all the centers though staff has been drastically curtailed. Outdoor Education Centers of the Cincinnati Recreation have continued to grow and thrive because of

the dedicated spirit of the employees and ability to overcome great obstacles with the strong support of the people who believe in and enjoy our programs.

In Retrospect--Looking back there have been so many good and unusual things that have happened in Cincinnati Outdoor Education Centers. In 1980 Don Brannen was hired at Avon Woods. He was not aware that his father had worked at California Woods. Don Brannen, Sr. was a naturalist during the years of 1954 to 1957; also an Indian dancer. In 1982 changes were made. Ruth Heinzerling retired and Lew Spurlock was transferred to California Woods and Don Brannen and Pat Cummings went there with him. History completed its full circle with Don now working where his deceased father had worked. Today when young Don Brannen (age 1 year and 4 months) visits he is the third generation at California Woods. John Brannen, our resident caretaker is also the son of Don Brannen, Sr.

It is not my intention to list the complete staff at California Woods. It must be said that many fine and talented naturalists have worked there, made their contribution and moved on to higher achievements. There are those who still keep in touch (former employees). Earl Thirey visits the area with the Audubon Society and Cincinnati Wildflower Society. Worth Randall (Director 1973-1976) still visits and does bird surveys. Paul Hellman (our history recorder) does surveys with the Audubon Society. Fred Nieman, naturalist and Indian dancer is still active in birding and works for the National Park Service at the Howard Taft Historic Site. Greg McCabe, Jerry Meyer, Pat Cummings, Ben Mathew, Ed Loop, Lois Asborne and many part-time naturalists were dedicated people. The memory of Mark Devine will always remain a part of California Woods. A memorial plaque is now permanently installed in his memory.

A special thanks must go to all the unmentioned volunteers who have supported us in so many ways that we have not mentioned here. The present Advisory Board (1987) is very much involved in our Special Events and the upgrading of our facility and grounds.

We have come a long way and accomplished many things. The future can only be brighter than the past for Outdoor Education at California Woods Nature Preserve.